

# Slavery, racism and manumission in Colombia (1821-1851)

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## Abstract

On July 21, 1821, two years after the triumph of the Bolivarian Army over the Spanish Crown in Colombian territory, the Congress and the Executive Power approved a manumission law known as ‘Law of Free Wombs’ to gradually end the institution of slavery. Despite its “philanthropic intentions,” this law protected most slaveholders’ socio-economic and political interests. Racism against people of African origin persisted and slavery was, as a matter of fact, maintained for more than three decades. Why slavery was not abolished in Colombia, as Simon Bolívar had promised, once the war for independence was won? Did racist ideas influence the debates on the manumission process and the abolition of slavery? How might one assess this thirty-years-long process? This paper seeks to answer these questions based on the analysis of relevant primary and secondary sources. The text contributes to the existing body of literature on both the manumission process and the history of racism in Colombia.

*Keywords:* manumission, racism, slavery.

## Resumen

El 21 de julio de 1821, dos años después del triunfo patriota sobre la Corona española en territorio colombiano, el Congreso y el Ejecutivo aprobaron la ley de manumisión conocida como ‘Ley de Libertad de Partos’ para acabar gradualmente con la institución de la esclavitud. A pesar de sus “intenciones filantrópicas”, dicha ley protegía los intereses

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socioeconómicos y políticos de la mayoría de los esclavistas. El racismo hacia los afrodescendientes persistió y de hecho la esclavitud continuó por más de tres décadas. ¿Por qué no se abolió la esclavitud al ganar la guerra, como Simón Bolívar había prometido? ¿Afectaron las ideas racistas el debate sobre el proceso? ¿Cómo se puede evaluar el mismo? Este artículo busca responder esas preguntas con base en el análisis de fuentes primarias y secundarias relevantes. El texto aporta a los estudios existentes sobre el proceso de manumisión y la historia del racismo en Colombia.

*Palabras clave:* esclavitud, manumisión, racismo.

## Introduction

Throughout the wars for independence in Spanish America, Creole elites referred to *freedom and free citizens* as key factors of a civilized society. These notions, nonetheless, did not apply to most people of African descent. In fact, despite the decisive contribution of Afro-descendants to the triumph of the republican cause, and Simon Bolívar's promise of ending slavery once the independence was won, thousands of Afro-descendants continued to live in slavery, and some soldiers were re-enslaved by their former owners in the 1820s. As Reales (2007) points out, the Afro-descendant contribution was not sufficient to overcome the socio-racial system that characterized the Bolivarian world, and the Creole elites continued to exert inexorable control over slavery after the independence process.

It should be underlined that congressmen, military officers, powerful landlords, and even Roman Catholic bishops were directly involved in slavery-related businesses in the early 1820s. This is why their interests were not negatively affected by the approval of the Law of Free Wombs in 1821, as will be argued in the text. The main purpose of this paper is to explain the main political and socio-economic aspects of the manumission process in Colombia from 1821 to 1851.<sup>1</sup> The text focuses on both the economic reparations that benefited slaveholders and the racist ideas that characterized this process.

The paper is divided into seven parts: first, an introduction, in which a general overview of the socio-economic and political situation of Afro-descendant people in the beginning of the manumission process is outlined; second, prior relevant research on the topic and the analytical framework of the text are presented; third, the history of the process and the failure to fulfilling the Bolivarian promise of ending slavery once the war against the Spanish Empire was won are explained; fourth, the racist environment that characterized the nation throughout this process and beyond is highlighted; fifth, the main reactions of Afro-descendants to this environment are described; sixth, the political

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1 It is important to recall that different forms of manumitting slaves existed since the colonial époque. These forms are described in the following pages.

and socio-economic debate on the legal abolition of slavery is underlined; and seventh; a conclusion, in which the central argument of the paper, which is that the manumission process significantly benefited most slaveholders and seemed to have helped perpetuate racism in Colombia, is underscored.

In the early 1820s, society in the would-be Republic of Colombia maintained the socio-racial structure inherited from colonial times. The “former” castes were still ruled by (white) people of European descent. Both Africans and Afro-Colombians were systematically excluded from the most important political and socio-economic decision-making institutions. Racism against people of African origin was permitted and even enhanced by intellectuals and political leaders (Reales 2001). Afro-descendants had extremely-limited access (or no access at all) to the Eurocentric education system. Even those who had been manumitted had to face racist practices and socio-racial prejudices when trying to succeed economically.

These prejudices were multiplied with the advent of the republican era in the Americas. As Anthony Marx (1998) would say, the Colombian state made race, while officially imposing the idea of the pursuit of a national (ethnic) homogenization, the “keystone for progress.” This is the main reason why ‘*whitening*’ practices were present throughout Colombia in the first half of the Nineteenth Century and beyond.

## Prior Relevant Research and Analytical Framework

Well-documented texts on the different forms of manumission, particularly during the colonial époque, have been written by historians and anthropologists in recent decades. This is why the works of Carlos Aguirre (1992) and Rafael Díaz (2001) on the (colonial) manumission serve as important references to introduce the history of the manumission process. The critical sources for the study of the manumission process in Colombia, nevertheless, are the texts ‘*El proceso de manumisión en Colombia*,’ written by Margarita González (1977), and ‘*La esclavitud en Colombia*,’ written by Horacio Rodríguez (1980). These texts explore in detail not only the particularities of the process but also the domestic slave trade during that time.

Other texts are also important for the study of the manumission process at the local and regional (Spanish America) levels. Antonio Galvis (1974), for instance, wrote an outstanding work on slavery, in general, and the local manumission process in Bogotá, in particular. His work ‘*La esclavitud en Bogotá durante el período de 1819 a 1851*’ explains how some slaveholders sold and bought slaves of all ages throughout the process. The book of Rolando Mellafe (1984) ‘*La esclavitud en Hispanoamérica*,’ details the interests of the Creole elites in the first half of the Nineteenth Century.

Regarding the racist ideas that characterized the manumission process in Colombia, three relevant texts are used. The first one, *‘La controversia jurídica y filosófica librada en la Nueva Granada en torno a la liberación de los esclavos y la importancia económica y social de la esclavitud en el siglo XIX,’* is perhaps the most cited essay on this topic. It was written by Jaime Jaramillo Uribe (1989) and studies in depth the controversial debate on how and when to end the institution of slavery in the would-be Republic of Colombia. The second one, *‘Negros en Colombia: Identidad e invisibilidad,’* is another essay that explores whitening practices and socio-racial exclusion in the country. This text was written by Nina de Friedemann (1992) and accurately introduces the “invisibility,” that is the systematic exclusion of Afro-Colombians as a racist practice at both private and public levels. The third one, *‘Prensa, abolición y racismo hacia los(as) afrocolombianos(as), 1810-1851,’* is an undergraduate thesis, which was written by the author in 2001, that explores how racism affected Afro-Colombians during that period. That thesis uses press texts and archive documents as primary sources, which will be utilized in this paper to present both statistics on the manumission process and the author’s approach to the problem of racism that affected the Afro-Colombian population. This problem and terms that are used in the text are defined in the analytical framework outlined below.

Social scientists have used the same lexicon that the Spaniards utilized when referring to slavery-related issues. It is not hard to find (Latin American history) texts that use concepts such as ‘gente de color’, ‘elemento negro’, ‘negreros(as)’, ‘trata negrera’, etc. It is important to recall that during the transatlantic slave trade the Europeans spread the use of this offensive lexicon. For most Europeans, (black) Africans were “inferior” to them in all possible senses.

Reales (2001) and Mellafe (1984) list the vast number of terms that were utilized by the Spaniards to discriminate against Afro-descendants. ‘Negros’, ‘negros loros’, ‘negros bozales’, ‘negros finos’, ‘pardos’, ‘morochos’, ‘mulatos’, ‘zambos’, ‘muleques’, ‘horros,’ are only some of those terms. A contemporary reaction to this racist lexicon was the new political lexicon that some Afro-descendant leaders, activists and academics created to encourage the elimination of this (linguistic) racist practice. With the recognition of their new lexicon, Afro-descendants not only intend to highlight their crucial contribution to all Latin American nations but also the fact that they want to defend a cultural identity and heritage that are rooted in Africa.

The concept ‘Afro-descendants’ itself became a “powerful” term only after the United Nations World Conference against Racism of 2001. As Reales (2007) points out, this concept, as well as ‘people of African origin’, ‘Afro-Colombians’, etc., essentially refers to those people whose ancestors lived in slavery. It should be noted that terms such as ‘Afro-neogranadinos’ or ‘Afro-grancolombianos’ have been utilized by historians in order to refer to particular periods of the Colombian history in the first half of the Nineteenth Century.

The term 'socio-racial' is also used throughout the text. It refers to those discriminatory social practices and classifications that the Spaniards (and their descendants in the Americas) defended, based on the skin color and particularities of both the indigenous people and Afro-descendant persons. The 'socio-racial structure or pyramid' that persisted in Colombia after the independence process can be seen precisely as a mere prolongation of the socio-racial castes system that ruled the Spanish colonies for more than three centuries.<sup>2</sup>

There is no doubt that the socio-racial structure inherited from colonial times helped feed racism in Colombia. According to Barbary and Urrea (2004), racism can be defined as "the arbitrary naturalization of physical and cultural differences that leads certain populations to degrade specific groups or individuals through distinct social processes".<sup>3</sup> The author agrees with this definition of racism. In fact, such naturalization was enhanced by the Creole (White and Mestizo) elites through the education system, cultural practices and the media during the manumission process.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the Nineteenth Century, Colombians were educated under the influence of a system that excluded and discriminated against people of African origin, promoting racism at all levels. This produced self-esteem problems among some Afro-Colombians who internalized racism practices. Alvaro Tirado (1989) notes that political leaders and intellectuals promoted social equality in the Nineteenth century. Tirado clarifies, however, that this equality mainly referred to educated people who treated Afro-Colombians and indigenous persons as inferior human beings.

One of the direct consequences of this racist environment was the phenomenon of '*el blanqueamiento*' (whitening). Reales (2007) emphasizes that Afro-Colombians realized that '*el blanqueamiento*' was a good strategy to follow to ascend in the socio-racial pyramid inherited from the colonial époque, and many of them followed such strategy.

According to Nina de Friedemann (1992), '*el blanqueamiento*' grew stronger during the manumission process and beyond. Friedemann assures that this particular phenomenon was intentionally used by the (White and Mestizo) elites to ignore, diminish and "invisibilize" all ethnic groups and their cultural identities. One can see this "invisibility" when looking for texts that acknowledge the key contribution of Afro-descendants to Colombia. Few documents, for instance, recognize that Afro-Colombians (both men and women) were decisive to winning the war for independence and building the actual wealth of the nation. Although the academic interest in this historical fact has grown over

2 Magnus Morner (1973) accurately explains how people throughout the current Latin America were classified in accordance with the color of their skin, with the (white) masters occupying the highest stratum.

3 Barbary, Olivier and Urrea, Fernando. *Gente Negra en Colombia. Dinámicas sociopolíticas en Cali y el Pacífico*. Cidse-Ird-Colciencias. Cali, 2004, p. 56. Note: The translation is mine.

4 Reales (2001) studies in depth how well-known history and science books, and prestigious newspapers promoted both racist ideas and the ethnic homogenization discourse in the first half of the Nineteenth Century in Colombia.

the last fifteen years in the country, no doubt there is still much research to be performed in order to explain the meaning of that historical contribution.

## **The history of the manumission process in Colombia**

Different forms of manumission existed in the current Colombian territory years before the approval of the Manumission Law in 1821. Running way, or ‘el cimarronaje,’ was also a common occurrence throughout the slavery époque. Many ‘cimarrones’ (maroons) built small towns, known as ‘palenques,’ particularly in the coastal areas, where they lived in freedom and practiced their African traditions and languages. Some Afro-descendant slaves, however, were able to buy their freedom. After many years of hard work, those slaves who had had the chance to save enough money, for instance, could ask for their freedom. Slaveholders then decided if their slaves deserved to be manumitted or not.

Slaveholders also had sufficient power to legally free their slaves. Margarita González (1977) indicates that one of the main reasons slave owners implemented this form of manumission was because slaves helped raise their children. Some Afro-descendant slave women, for instance, came to breastfeed their owners’ children and relatives. As Reales (2001) recalls, Simon Bolívar himself was breastfed by one of his fathers’ slaves, whom Bolívar freed when he grew older.

Manumitting Afro-descendant slaves in the first half of the Nineteenth Century became a common occurrence during the wars for independence. Both the Spanish Empire and the patriots offered freedom to those slaves who joined their military forces. Clément Thibaud (2003) suggests that historians should exercise caution when studying the incorporation of slaves into the patriot armies. Based on his detailed analysis of primary sources, Thibaud concludes that only a small number of slaves volunteered on the patriot side, seeking freedom. Thousands of slaves, though, were forced to join the patriot armies throughout the war in Colombia and the other Bolivarian nations (Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia).

Bolívar promised Alexandre Pétion, President of Haiti, that once the war came to an end and the independence was achieved, he would abolish slavery in the liberated countries. It is well-known by historians that Pétion provided Bolívar arms and munitions in the context of this “commitment” to free all slaves. When the war ended, nonetheless, slavery was maintained in the five Bolivarian (liberated) nations.

Some historians have argued that Bolívar (unsuccessfully) tried to fulfill his promise. They point out that he could not do so because most congressmen were powerful slaveholders who did not want to lose the enormous productivity of their slavery-related businesses (Reales 2001). The fact is that Bolívar himself was a slave owner, and he only encouraged the Congress to approve a manumission law in order to gradually end slavery in

Colombia. After months of debates on how to compensate slave owners if manumitting slaves, both the Congress and the Executive Power approved the 'Law of Free Wombs of 1821'. As William Sharp (1968) points out, Colombian congressmen were mainly concerned about securing economic reparation for themselves when debating the purpose of this manumission statute. Their excuse to implement a gradual manumission - instead of an immediate abolition - was that "*all slaves were ignorant and needed to become human before becoming citizens*".<sup>5</sup> This particular "justification" was officially defended in different constitutional reforms that took place until the legal abolition of slavery was approved by both the Executive Power and the Congress on May 21, 1851.

The 'Law of Free Wombs,' published in '*Gazeta de Colombia*' on September 9, 1821, stated in its prologue that: "*the Congress, following the principles of wisdom, justice and fair politics, has established that our just government is to solve the problems affecting the slaves, without compromising nor diminishing the economic rights of the slaveholders*".<sup>6</sup> Those rights essentially referred to economic-reparation measures for the slave owners.

The Manumission Law of 1821 can be summarized as follows: It established that those who were born to a slave mother (from the date of its approval on) were free, if and only if, the mother made effective the economic reparation (an immediate payment) to her slaveholder. If the mother did not have the means to make such a payment, the "free" newborn had to work until he/she turned eighteen years old. Moreover, the "free" new adult had to demonstrate that he/she was able to serve society when turning eighteen. Otherwise, he/she had to either join the armed forces or do slave common jobs but as a "free" person.

In order to secure the economic reparation for the slave owners, the Manumission Law also promoted the creation of public manumission funds at the municipal level. These funds were totally controlled by both local authorities and the Roman Catholic Church, which played a decisive political and socio-economic role throughout the three decades that the manumission process lasted. The manumission process strengthened, in fact, not only the relations between the State and this religious institution but also the latter's influence over the education system, at both municipal and national levels.<sup>7</sup>

The statistics on the manumission-related transactions and the actual number of slaves who were freed during the process have not been determined yet. In order to accurately obtain such data, it is necessary to perform research on every single municipal archive of the former nineteen Colombian provinces (excluding the current Panama). These

5 Congreso de Angostura, Libro de Actas, publicado y compilado por Roberto Cortázar y Luis Cuervo, Bogotá, 1921, pp. 20-21. In: Sharp, William. El Negro en Colombia. Manumisión y Posición Social. *Revista Razón y Fábula* N° 5, Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, 1968, pp. 94-95.

6 *Gazeta de Colombia*, Bogotá, 9 de septiembre de 1821, pp. 5-6. Note: This official newspaper (primary source) was studied by the author in his undergraduate (history) thesis. The translation is mine.

7 This summary is based on the main topics of this Law. The Law can be consulted in Reales (2001).



provinces were: Cauca, Buenaventura, Socorro, Mompox, Cartagena, Pamplona, Neiva, Vélez, Tunja, Santa Marta, Riohacha, Popayán, Bogotá, Mariquita, Antioquia, Pasto, Veragua, Chocó, and Casanare. It should be noted that in early 1851 another eleven provinces were created in the country: Azuero, Barbacoas, Córdova, Chiriquí, Medellín, Ocaña, Santander, Soto, Tundama, Túquerres, and Valledupar.<sup>8</sup>

As mentioned above, a study of this kind has not yet been conducted in the country. Nonetheless, Gregorio Hernández (1956), Antonio Galvis (1974), and Leonardo Reales (2001) estimate - based on different primary sources (notary archives, manumission letters, official newspapers, etc.) - that no more than six thousand slaves (out of almost forty thousand slaves who lived in the 1830s in Colombia according to the government) were publicly manumitted during the manumission process.

Galvis (1974) points out that it is easy to find inconsistencies when studying the census of slaves and the manumission-process figures in Bogotá. These inconsistencies were mainly due to two reasons. First, not all manumissions were public. And second, the aforementioned forms of manumitting slaves (not necessarily public) continued to be implemented until 1851.

The 'Law of Free Wombs of 1821' helped increase the number of manumissions in the country, but this fact did not negatively affect the slaveholders' socio-economic interests. Slave owners maintained, as a matter of fact, their lands, properties, and wealth. One can argue that most former slaves continued to do common slave jobs after being manumitted. Many of them kept working in gold mines and as domestic servants.

Margarita González (1977) concludes that the 'Law of Free Wombs' was nothing but a statue created to perpetuate slavery in Colombia. Rodríguez (1980) and Reales (2001) agree with González in the sense that this Law can be understood as a "political maneuver" through which the powerful elites negotiated the way on how to perpetuate slavery practices by other means, while receiving evident economic benefits.

The official reports of the manumission process also indicate that the authorities wanted to perpetuate racial prejudices and stereotypes that affected the people of African origin. Most reports discriminate against Afro-descendant slaves by highlighting their so-called "dominant vices". A letter from the époque, dated on April 30, 1850, illustrates this issue:

Full name of slaves and their dominant vice: (...) Venancio García (unsubordinated), Raimundo Bernal (vagabond), Ines Jimenez (coquette), Jeronimo Canabal (pervert), Teodoro Villamil (thief), Benito Montero (alcoholic), Magdalena Zuñiga

<sup>8</sup> For more information on these provinces, see Reales (2001).



(maroon), Gregorio Cantillo (gambler), Teresa Cabrales (sex addict), Martin Brandon (lazy) (...).<sup>9</sup>

These “dominant vices” that most slaves supposedly had make it easier to comprehend how the elites enhanced a moral (Catholic) order that all Colombians were expected to follow. The same particular “vices,” however, also let historians understand the vast number of forms of resistance, such as insubordination, running away, and “non-proper behaviors and attitudes,” that many slaves had while facing the noxious consequences of the racist and discriminatory environment in which they lived.

Before analyzing in more depth the racist ideology that characterized Colombia during the manumission process, it should be mentioned that when scholars study manumission texts like the one outlined above, they find that most slaves held their owners’ last names. Galvis (1974) notes that some slaves (in Bogotá) had six last names in an extremely-short period of time. Most slaveholders assigned their last names to their (new) slaves. Rafael Díaz (2001) underlines how this practice was created to diminish the Afro-descendants’ heritage and actual ethnic and personal identity.

Slave owners avoided mixing slaves with other Afro-descendants of the same ethnic background not only to impose the Spanish language on slaves but to prevent rebellions and conspiracies. However, some slaves were able to keep - as their last names - the names of their communities of origin in Africa. This is the reason why there were/are Afro-Colombians who held/hold (African) “last names” such as Carabalí, Mina, Arará, Chalá, Congo, Biohó, Balanta, Lucumí, Fula, and Cetré.

While performing research on racism and racial-discrimination practices in the first half of the Nineteenth Century, the author made great effort to examine most (official) press texts on the topic at the National Library of Colombia. I found that in spite of the fact that some Afro-descendants maintained their “Africa-related” names the vast majority of them were forcibly to adopt their masters’ last names. After studying in detail some two hundred lists of distinct manumissions in the country, I concluded that the most frequent last names held by both the slave owners and their slaves were: Arboleda, Palacios, Mosquera, Córdoba, Valencia, Caicedo, Quintana, Asprilla, Restrepo, Gutiérrez, Arango, Escobar, Cruz, Torres, Moreno, García, Perea, Martínez, Montoya, Rodríguez, Sánchez, Copete, López, Rentería, Castillo, Galeano, Murillo, Vanegas, Vergara, Hurtado, Izquierdo, Arce, Rojas, Pinzón, Bermúdez, Ariza, Vega, Zambrano, Rueda, Gómez, Medina, Romero, Lozano, Mendoza, Serrano, Palomino, Barrios, Manrique, Hernández, Henríquez, Borrero, Vidal, Díaz, Flórez, Durán, Alvarez, Ortiz, Londoño, Andrade, Urrutia, Sarmiento, Franco, Vargas, Mutis, Carreño, Ibáñez, Tenorio, Ulloa,

9 Carta y lista sobre esclavos. Cartagena, 30 de abril de 1850. Fondo de Negros y Esclavos, Manumisión, Legajo I, Archivo General de la Nación, Bogotá. Note: This list is outlined in Reales (2001). The translation is mine.

Sanz, Carrillo, Obando, Reyes, Ceballos, Arenas, Daza, González, Quiñónez, Rey, Del Real, Figueroa, Herrán, and Valderrama.<sup>10</sup>

It should be noted that this list may lack other frequent last names, but there can be no doubt that it serves as an important reference for the study of the manipulation and change of many slaves' last names as a common practice in Colombia and the Bolivarian nations. This list may be used, in fact, to explain why the same family names are present throughout the Pacific zone of Ecuador and Peru. On June 22, 1843, the Pedro Alcántara Herrán government changed the 'Law of Free Wombs' in order to authorize (international) slave trade activities for a few years.<sup>11</sup> Both the Congress and President Herrán easily approved the Law of June 22, 1843, which in its Article 4 eliminated Article 6 of Law of June 21, 1821, to permit the sales of slaves to other nations.<sup>12</sup> Entire Afro-Colombian families were sold to slave owners who lived in the Ecuadorian and Peruvian Pacific zones as well. This fact helps explain the vast number of coincidences between Afro-descendants' last names in the Pacific region of these countries.

Hernández (1956) underscores that in the weeks following passage of the Law of June 22, 1843, there were slave transactions. Strong ties between slave owners and politicians were maintained throughout the manumission process. Most Colombian presidents of that time (José María Obando, José Hilario López, Joaquín Mosquera, and Tomás Cipriano de Mosquera) were themselves slaveholders. Tomás Cipriano de Mosquera decided to change, once again, the 'Law of Free Wombs,' to reestablish the prohibition of international slave trade activities. This final prohibition was mainly due to pressure from the British Crown, which was the most important commercial partner of Colombia and other Andean nations. As Robing Blackburn (1988) indicates, the triumphs of the British abolitionism and anti-slavery policies were crucial. No doubt these triumphs exerted a strong influence on the Mosquera government to prohibiting sales of slaves to neighboring countries.

Both the Colombian Congress and President Mosquera approved the Law of April 28, 1847, which prohibited both imports and exports of Afro-descendant slaves. This Law had, however, a particular reservation, which established that slaveholders had the chance to bring to Colombia as many slaves as they want, for the year to come after its approval, if the slaves were to work as domestic servants.<sup>13</sup> Hernández (1956) found a copy of

10 These last names were taken from *Gaceta Oficial*, 12 de enero de 1851, *Gaceta Oficial*, 21 de mayo de 1851 and *El Neogranadino*, 23 de junio de 1849. Note: This particular list can be consulted in Reales (2001). Other lists of this kind may be seen in Galvis (1974).

11 It should be recalled that the Manumission Law of 1821 prohibited the slave trade at the international level and established punishments for those slaveholders who sold slaves to other countries.

12 Based on Law of June 22, 1843. Published in *Gaceta de la Nueva Granada*, Bogotá, 22 de junio de 1843. S.P. Note: The entire Law can be consulted in Reales (2001). The translation is mine.

13 Based on Law of April 28, 1847. Published in *Gaceta de la Nueva Granada*, Bogotá, 22 de mayo de 1847. Note: The entire Law can be consulted in Reales (2001). The translation is mine.

a transaction that was made only a few days before the approval of this Law. According to Hernández, on April 23, 1847, Julio Arboleda, a slaveholder, politician, and powerful landlord, sold to Pablo del Solar (in Peru) ninety nine slaves and their one hundred and thirteen “free” children.<sup>14</sup> These children became slaves as soon as they set foot on Peruvian territory. Slaveholders exported some pregnant slaves, and once they gave birth, their children were brought to Colombia as slaves (Rodríguez 1980). The various strategies that slave owners and politicians used to outwit the authorities while continuing slavery-related lucrative activities, confirm that the ‘Law of Free Wombs of 1821’ and its regulatory decrees and complementary laws, helped perpetuate slavery by other means.

The manumission process did not eliminate racism and socio-racial exclusion practices in the country. Even though none of the Colombian Constitutions and government decrees in the first half of the Nineteenth Century formally discriminated against people of African origin, the statutes did not consider Afro-Colombians as equal citizens or recognized the ethnic diversity of the nation. As a matter of fact, throughout the manumission process Colombian society remained divided into socio-racial castes. No doubt the persistence of this socio-racial structure in the country made it easier for influential intellectuals to promote racial prejudices, particularly through the education system and newspapers, as will be argued below.

## **An overview to racism in Colombia during the manumission process**

The first Colombian Constitution (of 1821) did not introduce significant changes to the education system, which was Eurocentric and exclusionary. White and Mestizo elites, through the Roman Catholic Church, controlled both high schools and universities. Afro-Colombians had limited opportunities or no opportunities at all, to access these institutions, as most high schools and universities demanded ‘pure-blood certificates’ before enrolling new students. The vast majority of the Afro-Colombian population did not have economic resources to bribe the authorities in order to “hide” their ethnic (‘casta’) background and get such certificates.<sup>15</sup>

Newspapers also reproduced racist ideas during the “new” (republican) slavery period in Colombia. *‘El Neogranadino,’* which was the most influential newspaper throughout the 1840s and 1850s, promoted racial prejudices and strongly defended the Eurocentric education system (Reales 2001). This newspaper encouraged the Colombian youth to

14 Hernández found this transaction after exploring archive documents in Buenaventura, Popayán and Bogotá. He focused his research on the Pacific and Andean regions of Colombia.

15 Mellafe (1984) and Reales (2007) recall that the term ‘*casta*’ was a pejorative reference to those of mixed blood. Some Afro-Mestizos bought the ‘pure-blood certificate’ from authorities. This illegal operation, known as ‘*gracias al sacar*,’ was used, among many other things, to have access to the education system.

study the scientific work of Francisco José de Caldas, who was perhaps the most influential Creole intellectual in 1810s in the Bolivarian world. *‘El Neogranadino’* emphasized, in fact, that Colombian students should study Caldas’ academic work if they were to become talented persons and good citizens (Reales 2001). It should be underscored that Caldas constantly attacked and offended the Afro-descendant people by promoting all kind of racial stereotypes and prejudices about them in the would-be Republic of Colombia. Caldas, who would be known in Colombia as ‘the Wise Caldas,’ came to assure that “*African slaves and their descendants are ignorant by nature and only think of reproducing themselves as the corrupted beings that they are*”.<sup>16</sup>

*El Día*, which was another prestigious newspaper in the 1840s, acknowledged that the socio-racial pyramid inherited from the colonial époque persisted in Colombia, in spite of the advent of the republican world and its “equity” laws (Reales 2001). On September 13, 1848, *El Día* stated that “White noble Europeans, and their descendants in the Americas, formed the first class of society, as they were completely pure and avoided mixing with other classes. The second social class was formed by the white Creoles who did not have noble titles and lacked properties. The third class was formed by Mestizos and the Indigenous population. And the last and worst class was formed by the black race along with its multiple variations”.<sup>17</sup>

On August 30, 1850, *El Neogranadino* published an extensive article on socio-racial and development issues in the Spanish American world. The article was titled ‘Raza Hispano-Americana’ (Hispanic-American Race) and summarized the content of many press documents and text books that addressed these issues (Reales 2001). This article introduced the topic as follows: “Colombians should always follow the principles, practices and traditions of the most civilized members of humanity, who are of European background and are to rule the Western Hemisphere. This is why we should regenerate our population by encouraging the immigration of white Europeans who would help improve our physical and moral conditions”.<sup>18</sup>

This press article continues its racist approach to immigration, development and race issues by emphasizing that “Colombians should prohibit that primitive races can mix with the civilized race, as these particular mixtures complicate the situation of everyone and represent an imminent threat to social progress. (...) Besides, the Negroes will always hate white people, as the latter treated them as wild beasts”.<sup>19</sup>

16 Caldas, Francisco José de. *Semanario del Nuevo Reino de Granada*, Bogotá, 1808. Caldas’ scientific work was entirely compiled and edited by the ‘Biblioteca Popular de Cultura Colombiana,’ Bogotá, 1942, p. 191. Note: The translation is mine.

17 *El Día*, Bogotá, 13 de septiembre de 1848, p. 4. Note: This press article can be consulted in Reales (2001). The translation is mine.

18 *El Neogranadino*, Bogotá, 30 de agosto de 1850, S.P. Note: The entire article can be consulted in Reales (2001). The translation is mine.

19 *Ibid.*

The article concludes by insisting that “Hispanic Americans should definitely improve their physical and moral conditions by mixing with the only civilized race. (...) Germans and Anglo-Saxons are far the most convenient people for Colombians to do so. These Caucasian men are active and intelligent, and they have better feelings and passions than others. They are full of generosity, they respect women as partners of them, and they are always eager to create humanitarian institutions”.<sup>20</sup>

It is evident how this press article encouraged the nation to adopt a racist immigration policy, which, in fact, occurred a few decades later. The Afro-Colombian National Movement Cimarron (2004) points out how the ‘Law 114 of 1922’ on immigration established that “the Executive Power will encourage the immigration of individuals that don’t represent a concern for the social order because of their racial conditions, to promote the actual empowerment of the ethnic conditions of the nation”.<sup>21</sup>

Racism persisted in Colombia throughout the Nineteenth Century and beyond. Political leaders, intellectuals and even Roman Catholic bishops maintained and multiplied racist ideas at all levels. This racist environment had a determinant influence on the manumission process and perpetuated the socio-economic, cultural and political exclusion of all ethnic groups in the country. Afro-Colombians had distinct reactions to both racism and the manumission process itself.

## **The Afro-descendants’ reactions to racism and the manumission process**

The manumission process (ironically) encouraged slaves to escape from their masters in order to live as maroons. In fact, this process increased the number of maroons throughout Colombian territory (Reales 2001). Afro-descendant slaves did not receive any economic reparation for their years of hard work as the slaveholders did. Also, it was a common practice that both “manumitted” and escaped slaves were re-enslaved by their former owners and/or forced to serve in the Bolivarian armies.<sup>22</sup>

It is important to recall that Bolívar and his supporters, fearing the triumph of what they called ‘*la pardocracia*’ (Afro-mestizos’ rule), ordered the executions of the two most famous, powerful and influential Afro-Mestizo military officers, General Manuel Piar and Admiral José Prudencio Padilla. Reales (2007) emphasizes that both executions indicate that the Creole elites wanted to maintain the socio-racial pyramid (system) inherited

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Afro-Colombian National Movement Cimarron, 2004. *Annual Report on the Human Rights Situation of Afro-Colombians (1994-2004)*. Bogotá: Movimiento Nacional Cimarrón, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> The Bolivarian wars for independence ended in 1826, when the last Spanish bastion in the Bolivarian nations, Bolivia, was won by the patriots.

from the colonial époque. It is obvious that the (White and Mestizo) elites did not want to jeopardize what they had achieved politically and socio-economically as a result of the triumph over Spain. As John Lynch (2006) would say, the Creole elites, far from facing 'extermination,' were more capable of preserving power for themselves, as they proved in the course of the Nineteenth Century and beyond.

Sharp (1968) underlines, following historian Charles Griffin, that both Piar and Padilla would not have been condemned to execution if they would have not been '*pardos*.' On January 2, 1852, *El Neogranadino* published an interesting article in which their fate is recalled. This (liberal) newspaper described how the Conservative Party had been criticizing (for weeks) the racist behavior of a liberal woman who did not want to dance with an Afro-Colombian due to his racial background. The newspaper considered hypocritical such criticism and wrote: "Now White conservatives want us to believe that they are not racist. It seems to us that they want us to remind them that generals Piar and Padilla were murdered by dictator Bolívar just because they were '*pardos*,' and that their executions were largely celebrated by the Conservatives all over the country (...)"<sup>23</sup>

As suggested above, during the thirty-year manumission period, many slaves reacted to both the aforementioned racist environment and the process itself by escaping to join maroons in different '*palenques*'. Maroons became a serious threat not only to local authorities but also to the elites. As Jorge Palacios (1989) points out, throughout the slavery period public servants feared maroon revolts and potential alliances of maroons with foreigners. Palacios also notes that the Creole elites - particularly the White persons - also feared the violent behavior of some maroons who became thieves and tended to assault rich people in their own slave territories or "*haciendas*".

Socio-racial tensions made it easier for (liberal) General José María Obando to "invent" an illegal form of manumitting Afro-Colombian slaves. Obando had become the most popular officer of Colombia at the end of the war for independence (Bethell 1987) and wanted more political power. He offered freedom to those slaves who would support his fight against the Conservative regime that ruled Colombia in the 1830s and 1840s. In 1841, President Pedro Alcántara Herrán realized that Obando represented a serious threat, as he could overthrow the regime with his growing forces, and ordered Obando to be killed and his slaves to be captured and re-enslaved (Reales 2001).

Reales (2007) notes that Obando's war ended in 1843, when the Congress approved and made effective the Law of June 22<sup>nd</sup>, which was written by Herrán himself. This Law stated: "Any slave who denounces and proves that three or more slaves are planning to escape and fight the system will gain freedom, after the national authorities economically compensate his owner for losing labor force."<sup>24</sup> Reales (2007) adds that this Law proved to

23 *El Neogranadino*, Bogotá, 2 de enero de 1852. S.P. Note: The entire article can be consulted in Reales (2001).

24 Ley de 22 de junio de 1843. *Gaceta de la Nueva Granada*, Bogotá, 22 de junio de 1843, S.P. The entire Law can be consulted in Reales (2001). Note: The translation is mine.

be effective, as many slaves took advantage of its benefits seeking their personal freedom. In those cases, slave owners received an economic compensation as soon as they manumitted the slave(s).

Not all Afro-Colombians reacted to both racism and the manumission process the same way. No doubt some slaves believed what most slaveholders, political leaders and intellectuals said about the persons of African origin, that is, that black people were inferior human beings. This “mental slavery” that affected some Afro-Colombians helped multiply internalized racism practices among them. A good example of this can be seen in the words of an Afro-Colombian slave who was manumitted by the Mosquera family, which was one of the most powerful and influential families of slave owners in the Nineteenth Century. When that slave was told by one of his owner’s sisters that he had been manumitted, the slave just said: “Please let my master know that when I was his slave I felt free, and now that I am free I will be his slave...”<sup>25</sup>

It should be said that anecdotes of this kind help explain the origin of the low self-esteem of some Afro-Colombians. In short, both racism and internalized racism practices persisted throughout the manumission process and beyond. These practices can also be seen in the late 1840’s debates on the legal abolition of slavery in the country.

## The debate on the legal abolition of slavery in Colombia

The central characteristic of both the manumission process and the abolitionist debate in Colombia (and other Latin American nations) was the economic reparation for slaveholders. Public discussions focused on how to compensate the slave owners economically. Racism was also present in those discussions. An article from *El Neogranadino* that was published in the midst of the abolitionist debate indicates the presence of the racist ideology in the country. On June 23, 1849, this newspaper wrote: “We must abolish slavery not only because civilization demands it, but because it will become the perfect mean to avoid that the African race wants to mix with the American races”.<sup>26</sup>

This comment shows how the press kept multiplying racist ideas and prejudices. Other newspapers encouraged the *whitening* of the total population. For instance, on April 22, 1849, *El Siglo*, another prestigious newspaper of the 1840s and early 1850s, wrote in its editorial: “The tropical weather destroys the white race, which is the intelligent and wise race, whereas this weather does not have any effect on the blacks due to their amazing physical strength. It is convenient then to whiten the blacks by mixing both races. If this

25 This anecdote is outlined by Carlos Restrepo (1938) in his book *La Libertad de los Esclavos en Colombia*, p. 19. Note: The translation is mine.

26 *El Neogranadino*, Bogotá, 30 de agosto de 1850, S.P. Note: The entire article can be consulted in Reales (2001). The translation is mine.



can be done, the country will surely have a new race of intelligent and strong white men. That is why it is necessary to destroy the wall that separates both races, which is the wall of slavery”.<sup>27</sup>

The economic reparation for slaveholders became one of the most critical issues of the 1850 presidential electoral process. On March 21, 1850, Juan de Francisco Martin, the vice-presidential candidate for the Conservative Party, wrote and summarized in *La Civilización*, another influential conservative newspaper, the official position of his Party as follows: “The right to own slaves and the right to have lands are perfect rights and have the same relevance. This is irrefutable. Moreover, our Constitution recognizes the existence of slaves, meaning that slaveholders have the right to ask for economic reparation if they are obliged to manumit their slaves (...). Again, the right to own slaves has the same origin and relevance that the right to own lands, houses or merchandises. Both rights are as legal as sacred (...)”<sup>28</sup>

Like many leaders and intellectuals, this vice-presidential candidate strongly defended the idea that slaves deserved to be treated as things, rather than human beings. The candidate concluded his text by pointing out the position of his party on this issue: “We want to see the abolition of slavery soon, but we want it as far as it is legitimate and fair. In other words, we want slaves to be free without stealing their owners. If some liberals want to see no slaves in the country, they should promote at least the creation of some funds that guarantee the economic reparation for slaveholders. Defending this idea of freedom, while taking advantage of others’ wealth, is nothing but a ridiculous and hypocritical attitude”.<sup>29</sup>

It should be underscored that the strong pressure of the British Crown to end slavery-related activities overseas influenced the public debate on the abolition of slavery in Colombia and elsewhere. According to González (1977), José María Plata, the Colombian Secretary for Financial Affairs came to publicly highlight that the abolition of slavery had helped strengthen the relations between Colombia and Great Britain.

Reales (2007) summarizes the four aspects that helped produce the abolition of slavery as follows: “British pressure to end the slave trade and slavery-related activities, the approval of substantial economic reparations for the slave owners, the benefits for these slaveholders of offering (the same) non-qualified ‘jobs’ to former slaves, and the advantages

27 *El Siglo*, Bogotá, 22 de abril de 1849, p. 2. Note: The entire press article can be consulted in Reales (2001). The translation is mine.

28 De Francisco Martin, Juan. *La Civilización*, Bogotá, 21 de marzo de 1850, p. 131. In: Reales (2001). Note: The translation is mine.

29 *Ibid.*

for the elites of perpetuating socio-racial divisions and racism against Afro-descendants under a legal frame".<sup>30</sup>

It should be acknowledged, nevertheless, that some Colombian philanthropists publicly opposed to the economic reparation that was about to be approved for slaveholders. Although it was not a common occurrence, *El Neogranadino* and other national newspapers permitted those philanthropists to defend their positions. On February 7, 1851, for instance, a group of philanthropists wrote in *El Neogranadino* that the economic reparation was simply unjust and contradictory. They stated: "It's been a year since we publicly raised our ideas concerning the abolition of slavery. We defended, and still defend, the right to freedom that all slaves have, regardless the position of the slaveholders. Colombian society has to make this right effective without compensations of any kind for slaveholders".<sup>31</sup>

These philanthropists did not achieve their goal, which was abolishing the institution of slavery without the economic reparation for slaveholders. On May 21, 1851, both the Congress and the Executive Power approved the 'Law of Freedom for Slaves', which established that all slaves who lived in the country would be free from January 1, 1852 on. The Abolition Law was officially published in *Gaceta Oficial* on May 24, 1851. The Law largely referred to the manumission funds that were created to guarantee the economic reparation for slaveholders. The Law emphasized: "The manumission funds are sacred and neither authorities nor public institutions will use them for other purposes but the actual economic compensation for slave owners. If the funds are not utilized properly, the public servant(s) involved will be punished and have to give the money back to the funds".<sup>32</sup>

Some 2,000,000 pesos were used to economically compensate slaveholders throughout Colombia. This amount of money was extremely high, even higher than the actual annual budget of the nation in the early 1850s (Reales 2001). In fact, it took twenty five years for the country to economically recover from the expenditure (González 1977).

The Abolition Law also stated that the would-be former slaves would be able to fully exercise their political and economic rights as of January 1, 1852. According to the Law, these new (Afro-descendant) citizens<sup>33</sup> were entitled to enjoy those rights as equals, since

30 Reales, Leonardo. 2007. The Contribution of the Afro-Descendant Soldiers to the Independence of the Bolivarian Countries (1810-1826). In: *Revista de Relaciones Internacionales, Estrategia y Seguridad*. Vol. 2 N° 2. Bogotá: Universidad Militar de Colombia, p. 29.

31 *El Neogranadino*, Bogotá, 7 de febrero de 1851, p. 46. In: Reales (2001). Note: These philanthropists signed the article as a group. They did not list their actual names in the text. The translation is mine.

32 LEI de 21 de mayo de 1851 Sobre libertad de esclavos. *Gaceta Oficial*, Bogotá, 24 de mayo de 1851, pp. 330-331. Note: The entire Law can be consulted in Reales (2001). The translation is mine.

33 According to the official statistics of 1851, 16,147 Afro-Colombian slaves became (direct) beneficiaries of the Abolition Law (Reales 2001).

the “new” nation would be ruled by a society formed by free men and women living under the same judicial conditions.

The truth is that Afro-descendants, in general, and former slaves, in particular, were not included in the so-called “new” society as equal citizens. General Jose María Obando, who would become President of Colombia in 1853, acknowledged this reality as follows: “The Republic has turned its eyes to defend a population that has been victim of human avarice for decades. It has restored their rights but it has not restored those skills that they lost for serving and working against their will”.<sup>34</sup>

Jaramillo (1982), González (1977), Reales (2007) and Sharp (1968) agree with the fact that not only former slaves but also most Afro-Colombian citizens were notoriously excluded from social development opportunities and the public education system, even when they had become equal before the law. Sharp (1968) emphasizes that the skin color of Afro-Colombians continued to be the central sign of their inferior socio-racial status regardless the legal abolition of slavery. Hebe (1974) and Reales (2007) also underline that neither Colombia, nor the other four Bolivarian nations, had enough political will to incorporate the Afro-descendant persons into their most important decision-making spaces and institutions. Once slavery was abolished, a *segregation-like system* “started” to rule the nation and Afro-Colombians became a forgotten minority (Sharp 1968). In short, the abolition of slavery did not make Afro-descendants equal in practice, as a racist environment not only persisted in Colombia but also helped perpetuate a generalized socio-racial exclusion towards persons of African origin throughout the country.

## Conclusion

White and Mestizo elites in the would-be Republic of Colombia maintained the socio-racial system inherited from colonial times to rule the nation throughout the 1820s and beyond. The advent of the republican era did not bring significant political or socio-economic changes to the Afro-Colombian population. Some slave soldiers continued to serve in the Bolivarian armies in the 1820s and others were even re-enslaved by their former owners once the war for independence was won.

Simón Bolívar did not fulfill his well-known historical promise of abolishing slavery at the end of the war. What Bolívar and the Creole elites did instead was to approve the ‘Law of Free Wombs of 1821,’ a gradual abolition law that helped increase the number of manumitted slaves in the country. This Law did not affect, nonetheless, the slave owners’ socio-economic interests. As a matter of fact, the manumission process helped perpetuate

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34 Obando, José María. *El Neogranadino*, Bogotá, 2 de enero de 1852, S.P In: Reales (2001). Note: The translation is mine.

slavery-like activities and the racist environment that characterized Colombia in the Nineteenth Century.

Racism and internalized racism practices made it easier for the Creole elites to exclude Afro-Colombians politically and socio-economically. Afro-descendants had different reactions to this racist environment. Some of them escaped to live as maroons under their own laws and cultural practices in '*palenques*,' while others were seriously affected by self-esteem problems that made them follow what the white and Mestizo rulers said.

The central characteristic of both the manumission process and the abolitionist debate in Colombia was the economic reparation for the slave owners. Racist ideas were also present during the public discussions on this controversial issue. Although some philanthropists argued and defended the idea that the institution of slavery was to be abolished without compensating slaveholders economically, their goal was not achieved. Slaveholders, many of whom belonged to the political elites, succeeded and obtained high amounts of money for freeing their slaves.

Both former slaves and Afro-Colombian citizens in general were notoriously excluded from socio-economic development opportunities and the public education system, even when they became "equal" before the law and "enjoyed" the same rights of the rest of the population. In short, although the abolition of slavery was a "philanthropic act," it did not change the racist environment that ruled the country. Racist ideas not only persisted in Colombia but also helped marginalize Afro-descendants in the second half of the Nineteenth Century and beyond.

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**Note:** This paper presents several footnotes in which some primary sources are used. These sources include archives' documents and national newspapers from the Nineteenth Century. They can be consulted in Restrepo (1938), Reales (2001), and Sharp (1968).